



Alcimedès

Where were you on the afternoon of February 25th 1953? If you were anywhere near the Eagle Pub, Cambridge, you may be able to help us with our enquiries. Apparently, two young scientists stormed into the pub around lunchtime and announced that they had “discovered the secret of life.” In their considered opinions, they had unearthed the double helix structure of DNA. They are believed to go by the names of Watson and Crick. Such arrogance will not be tolerated.

Not only did they disrupt what was a very pleasant lunchtime break for a large number of people, but they then had the audacity to write up this minor event in the prestigious journal “Nature.” April 25th 1953, to be exact.¹

If you had your lunch disturbed by these young upstarts, please get in touch. Although it is now sixty years since the article was published, we’ll see what we can do. Alcimedès understands the distress of having your pint disturbed by such loutish behaviour.

According to the British Red Cross, the number of people harming themselves by deliberate poisoning has increased by 50% over the past 10 years. Using figures from in-patient admissions to hospitals across the UK, the BRC announced that there were 110,000 admissions to UK hospitals last year which represented an approximately 50% increase across all age groups when compared with figures from a decade ago.²

As a result of their findings, the BRC has launched their “*What? When? How much?*” campaign to help grind this upward trend to a halt. Additionally, they have launched video advice (first aid and coping strategies) for those unfortunate enough to find that their friends have succumbed to deliberate self poisoning.

Abortion remains a highly emotive and divisive subject. However, a heartbreaking case in America, which has recently seen a doctor convicted of first degree murder, has highlighted how opposing sides of the debate feel they can use the same tragic circumstances to strengthen their arguments.

In May 2013, Dr Kermit Gosnell, a 72-year-old doctor from Philadelphia, was found guilty of the murder of three babies, who were delivered live but then killed by scissors in late-term abortions.³ He was also convicted one count of involuntary manslaughter. Gosnell was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

Pennsylvania has a 24-week limit for abortions. Many of his former staff testified that he routinely performed abortions outside this limit, and would “snip” their spinal cords with scissors if born alive. He was said to have performed several thousand abortions

over three decades. The court also heard details of the squalid premises in which he conducted the procedures, with blood-stained medical equipment and foetal remains being discovered during a police raid. His clinic had not been inspected by state officials in over fifteen years.

The anti-abortion lobbyists have claimed that this case highlights the grim reality of a barbaric procedure. The pro-abortionists have counter-argued that such clinics only arise when legislation is excessively tight with no flexibility, and inspections are almost non-existent.

Since the North Report in 2010, which looked into possible improvements in drink-drug drive legislation, not only has there been a change in government, but there has been much toing and froing in response to the report. One of the areas that is under consideration at present is the idea of “safe levels” of illicit and medicinal drugs. This means that, unless there was to be a “zero tolerance” to a particular substance, there would be an accepted range for a drug level, below which it would be safe to drive.

An expert panel was convened in April 2012 to discuss these issues, and its results were published in March 2013.⁴ This report has listed the considered-safe levels of a range of medicinal and illicit drugs as well as their breakdown products. The panel also considered whether alcohol may be on-board as well and has altered the drug levels accordingly.

Whether the government will accept all, some or none of the expert panel’s report and recommendations remains to be seen in the coming months. Cherry picking is a favourite hobby of many politicians: please contact Sir Peter North for further details.

On a similar footing, the UK’s Road Safety Minister, Stephen Hammond, has announced tougher drink-driving rules from 1st June 2013.⁵ Those drink-drivers who have lost their licences and are considered to be High Risk Offenders (HRO) are currently allowed to start driving again once their licence has been re-issued by the DVLA, provided they subsequently pass a medical with a DVLA doctor. Under new legislation, the driver will have to undergo the medical examination *prior* to the licence being re-issued: the licence will only be granted provided there is no evidence of alcohol dependence or abuse. Those individuals who fail to provide a blood sample as part of their return to the road will also be considered to be HROs and will not have their licences returned.

Cannibalism may not be to everyone’s taste, but forensic anthropologists at the Smithsonian National Museum, Washington,

have published the first scientific proof that, in the early 1600s, the first English colonists setting foot in America may have resorted to cannibalism to ward off starvation.⁶

Human bones, belonging to a teenage girl buried at James Fort, Virginia (part of the Jamestown colony) were discovered last year as part of a long-term excavation. Forensic analysis of surface markings on the bones has concluded that the defects are consistent with muscle being hacked from the bones using sharp implements in a frenzied manner. Previous written evidence had documented the harsh conditions of the early English colonists, with obtaining food being high on the “to do” list: cannibalism was mentioned in these historical documents, but this discovery represents formal scientific evidence to support the practice.

The year 1609–1610 was said to be particularly harsh and became known as the Starving Time. During this period, only 50 of the 500 Jamestown colonists survived.⁷

In this age of austerity, where many of us may be inclined to adopt a “*Look after number one*” attitude, Alcimedes has found it reassuring that increasing numbers of people are seemingly willing to donate their organs to complete strangers. Indeed, the figure has almost trebled in the space of a year. Figures released by the Human Tissue Authority have revealed that in the year 2012/13, there were 104 “non-directed” cases, compared with 38 cases in 2011/12.⁸ Such acts of selflessness would probably bring a tear to the eye of even the most hardened Jamestown cannibal... if only because it represented a wasted meal.

An unannounced HMIP (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons) inspection of HMP Moorland in South Yorkshire has revealed that there was no sex offenders treatment programme (SOTP) in place.⁹ This comes despite the fact that approximately a third of the prisoners were sex offenders. Moorland was the scene of rioting by inmates in 2010 and its progress is therefore of particular concern to politicians. Now that HMIP is aware that sex offenders are being released from Moorland without a programme of treatment on offer, politicians may be forced to get tough,

especially as the privatisation of the running of Moorland is scheduled for late 2013.

Exit signs are on the way out. So it would seem is capital punishment. Recent figures compiled by the human rights charity Amnesty International indicate that capital punishment worldwide is riding a trend towards abolition.¹⁰ Despite their findings, Amnesty also noted that some countries, notably Gambia, India, Japan and Pakistan, had resumed executions and that the figure had risen significantly in Iraq. Statistics remain elusive for China (as with previous years) with reliable, official figures being unobtainable. At least 682 people were executed worldwide in 2012, compared with 680 in 2011. However, the number sentenced to death fell from 1923 (total of 63 countries) in 2011, to 1722 (total 58 countries) in 2012.

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